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About '*Rose Blanche*' and the story of the Holocaust

In 1985, a picturebook titled *Rose Blanche*, based on the idea of Roberto Innocenti and including his illustrations, was published. This publication initiated a discussion (or perhaps only another stage thereof) on how to talk to children about war, especially about concentration camps and the Holocaust. At that time this book was neither published, nor talked about in our country. Today, Innocenti's books, both those he had written before *Rose Blanche* and those created later, are available on the Polish market. The fact that the story about war has not been published among them allows suspecting that it will not be published in Poland. However, other (newer) picture books discussing war appeared on our market, for example: *The Enemy* by Serge Bloch and Davide Cali, *How War Changed Rondo* by Roman Romanyszyn and Andrij Łesiw, and about the Holocaust, such as *Pamiętnik Blumki (Blumka's Memoir)* by Iwona Chmielewska or *Smoke* by Antón Fortes and Joanna Concejo. It is hard to resist the impression that these publications appeared on our market like a thief at night: they have silently slid onto bookstores' shelves and stayed there. They have neither led to a broader discussion, nor triggered any talks about how to talk about these topics to children.

While reminding of the existence of *Rose Blanche*, I would like to show that the Holocaust settled in picturebooks for children over thirty years ago and it has been in a way familiarised, which may explain why today it is not treated with the attention and seriousness, with which it should be treated. Whereas, while describing changes that have been introduced in various issues of the book, as well as discussions it has triggered, I thought that, essentially, adults usually look for confirmation of their own opinions and beliefs in picturebooks and argue how they should be presented to children. The fiercest dispute regarding *Rose Blanche* concerned who was burdened in the book with the responsibility for starting a war, whereas the least attention was devoted to the fact that this is a story about a girl, who follows her inner moral compass, goes against the binding law and lies to her own mother. Moreover, she does not explain her behaviour (while she is the narrator). Her be-

haviour is also not explained by the third person narrator (where he addresses the readers). And in the meantime, from a child's point of view, the issue of whether you can behave in a certain manner may prove to be more important than the fact that there are still wars being waged in the world.

In the collection of texts titled *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks*, edited by Janet Evans and published in 2015, the book *Rose Blanche* is mentioned twice. Once by Sandra Beckett, who writes that it was published in the middle of the eighties by the publishing company Creative Company, which also publishes picturebooks about *Little Red Riding Hood* (including *The Girl in Red* by Aaron Frisch and Roberto Innocenti), whom the researcher devotes the most attention in her text (Beckett 2013: 55). The author of the second reference is Elizabeth Marshall discussing *The Girl in Red*. She presented the illustrator thereof with the words: 'He is perhaps best known for his controversial Holocaust picturebook *Rose Blanche*. (Innocenti 1985)' (Marshall 2015: 163). And that is all. For authors of texts devoted to controversial and challenging picturebooks the work by Innocenti and Gallaz clearly proved to be not controversial enough to devote more time despite having been called controversial therein.

A similar situation is observed in the case of the book published in 2012 *Tabu w literaturze i sztuce dla dzieci (Taboo in Literature and Arts for Children)* edited by Bogusława Sochańska and Justyna Czechowska. Małgorzata Cackowska mentions Roberto Innocenti on the occasion of considerations regarding childhood ideologies. She writes:

In the West picturebooks for children, which take on an original form to discuss the topic of the Holocaust in a unique manner, have been created for several years. For instance, a book by Ruth Vander Zee *Erica's Story* (Creative Editions¹ 2003). Illustrated by Roberto Innocenti, almost as in a black and white photograph, very realistically presents fate of a girl thrown in a bundle from a train to Auschwitz, against the background of a grand history of the Holocaust. There are also books commemorating the lives of Janusz Korczak or Anne Frank. In Poland this topic is discussed in, among others, an extremely beautiful and poignant book by Anton Fortes and Joanna Concejo *Smoke* (ed. Tako 2011) (Cackowska 2012: 71).

We will find a little bit more information in *Das Bilderbuch. Ästhetik – Theorie – Analyse – Didaktik – Rezeption* by Jens Thiele, since *Rose Blanche* was the first children's picturebook discussing the Holocaust published in Germany. It appeared on the German market in 1986. We can read there that the first name and surname of the heroine is an allusion to the name of the Anti-Nazi organisation Weiße Rose (White Rose), which operated in Munich in 1942–1943. Thiele underlines that Innocenti's pictures were made with a photorealistic precision and depict the reality of

¹ Reference to the same American publisher defined by Beckett as Creative Company. Creative Editions is the imprint of this publisher.

life in Germany during war. Furthermore, he indicates that the artist used photographs. For example, he used a photograph of a Jewish boy from Warsaw Ghetto (Thiele 2003: 172). It triggered criticism from Zohar Shavit. She accused Innocenti of having placed the boy in a different context, which changed the significance of the photograph and obliterated its original meaning². In the photograph we see a small Jewish boy who follows a large group of other persons – men, women and children and, just like them, has raised hands, since behind him armed soldiers of the Wehrmacht are standing. Shavit adds that the photograph itself was taken by a German officer (it comes from the report by Jürgen Stroop, who was in command of German forces during liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto), who stood with a camera in front of the people walking and was looking at them, and they were looking at him. In *Rose Blanche* Wehrmacht soldiers were replaced by SS men, nobody aims at the boy, although one of the soldiers holds a rifle. In the book he appears alone and there is practically no information that he is Jew. Furthermore, it is not known from whose point of view we are looking at him, and who he is looking at, because persons who have detained him are standing behind him (Shavit 1999: 98–99).

The heroine of *Rose Blanche* is, what is important, a German girl who lives in a German town. In the first illustration in the book we see her accompanied by her mother and in a crowd of other people. She is waving a flag with a swastika saying goodbye to soldiers going to the front. The commentary underlines that the mood on that day was joyous, but 'sadness came later'. Already on the next page we see how the reality has changed: people are standing in a long queue for bread. Propaganda slogans appeared on the walls, and military patrols in the streets. However, Thiele notices that the illustrations emphasise the idyllic character of life in the town. Everything is neat, clean and well-taken care of. Children greet soldiers and play in the streets, or – as always – go to school, people help each other, a chimney sweep cleans chimneys, ducks swim in the pond. Detailed realism with which Innocenti presents life in the town evokes a peaceful mood, a sense of safety and ... unawareness of what is happening in the world. In a few words placed on the back cover of the book, Innocenti (who was born in 1940) wrote that his intention was to show how a child experiences war, the sense of which it does not understand, and related it to his own experience: 'My father did not want to answer my questions, but I knew something terrible has happened.'

A fundamental turn in the plot happens when Rose witnesses a small Jewish boy being caught, follows the car in which he is being transferred outside the town, and discovers the existence of a concentration camp. When asked by hungry children for food, the girl in secret from everyone (even from her mother) tries to gather food which she then gives to the imprisoned through the wires. In the background of the story we see images that allow us to realise how the war proceeds – the injured return from the front, and younger and younger soldiers are enlisted, while

² Shavit in her text describes a German edition of the book and treats it as a work by a German author.

the civilians are running away from the approaching enemy's army. In the meantime, Rose is still carrying food to the camp. Until one day she discovers that there is no camp any longer. On the same day she vanishes without a trace. A comment suggests that she was accidentally shot in a thick fog and this is the most probable solution. Nevertheless, Innocenti does not show the girl's death. And a verbal comment emphasises that Rose has never been found. The former and the latter constitute a kind of a gate for readers that do not agree with the heroine's death and prefer to search for other solutions to the plot.

A certain problem with the description of the verbal layer of *Rose Blanche* consists in the existence of various versions of the text accompanying Innocenti's illustrations. Christophe Gallaz, the Swiss writer (born in 1948), is considered to be the writer of the original version. However, the idea to tell this story came from the artist, who made up the story of Rose Blanche (and named the heroine with this name), and then drew the pictures telling the story and outlined the plot. Gallaz wrote the final version of the story in French after receiving the above materials. In the United States, translation into English by Marthy Coventry, who reviewed and corrected Richard Graglia, was published. At the same time it was published in Europe, in French. It was also supposed to be published in England, however, the publishing house, Jonathan Cape, launching the book onto the British market, decided to employ another writer, who was supposed to change Gallaz's text. Ian McEwan (born in 1948), at that time a beginner writer, was chosen. In the English edition we can find the information that the author of the text is Ian McEwan, who wrote it on the basis of the story by Gallaz (Stan 2004: 22–23).

Gallaz wanted to avoid being melodramatic and thus gave his text a simple form devoid of embellishments. He also strived to capture what was mentioned by Innocenti himself: experiencing war by a child who does not understand what is happening. Thus, he made Rose the narrator in the first half of the book, and introduced narration in third person when the girl starts bringing food for the imprisoned in the camp. Susan Stan noted that critics usually consider the death of the heroine to be the reason for changing the narrator; she, however, believes that the author also wanted to set a certain distance between a reader and the girl. A distance that allows a different evaluation of the events than the one that would have been made by Rose, as well as an evaluation of the girl. This tactic is, in fact, thought-over and, in result, allows avoiding evaluation in the verbal text. Rose, as a narrator, does not make them, since she is not aware of what concentration camps are and why they have been established. She knows about the war close to nothing as well. The third person narrator takes over the story, when the heroine would have to explain her motifs and why she steals food, why she keeps it a secret from her mother. We would also expect her to disclose what she really thinks about situations in which she participates.

McEwan's version seems to be more uniform, since, from the beginning, a third person narrator is talking to us, who in defined moments describes events as seen and experienced by Rose. Sometimes he even includes in the text questions that

she would ask herself. However, he comments the events at a certain distance and from the beginning also presents knowledge about things that the girl could not have known. Since the narrator cannot pretend that he does not know what the girl was not aware of, in some parts the text mentions something else than in Gallaz's version. Comments written by McEwan are more exhaustive and richer in terms of style. They are also to a larger extent aimed at triggering certain emotions and controlling them.

A good example can be a scene in which Rose discovers the existence of the camp. It is illustrated with a two-page picture showing several children in striped uniforms standing behind a barbed-wire fence accompanied by a text divided into two elements - one on each side. In Gallaz's version, we read the following:

Suddenly, electric barbed wire stopped me. Behind it there were some children standing still. I didn't know any of them. The youngest said they were hungry. Since I had a piece of bread, I carefully handed it to them through the pointed wires. They all stood in front of long wooden houses. The sun was setting behind the hills. It was windy. I was cold. (Gallaz, Innocenti 2011: [n.p.]).

Commentary to the same picture in McEwan's version:

Dozens of silent, motionless children stared at her from behind a barbed wire fence. They hardly seemed to breathe. Their eyes were large and full of sorrow. They stood like ghosts, watching as she came close. One of them called for food, and others took up the cry. 'Food, food, please be our friend. Please give us something to eat, little girl.' But she had nothing to give them, nothing at all. The cries died down, the silence returned. The winter sun was setting, the chilly wind made the barbed wire moan. Rose Blanche turned for home. Their sad and hungry eyes followed her into the forest. (McEwan, Innocenti 2004: [n.p.]).

Although differences between the American and English happen to be quite significant, both authors keep the accuracy of certain initial assumptions: in both versions Rose Blanche is the only person in the text with a name and thus contrasted with the anonymous rest. It is worth noticing here that Blanche does not sound as a German surname, but rather seems to be the second name of the girl and, in French, Rose Blanche also means the name of the organisation *Weißer Rose*, which invokes the memory thereof. In both versions, the symbolic meaning of seasonal changes was kept: in the story, winter comes with the war, and spring begins when war ends. Nevertheless, McEwan strives to make the story real and saturate it with realistic details, which is not necessarily a good solution (Stan 2004: 30). Jens Thiele mentions that many critics believed that Innocenti used photorealistic pictures, since he wanted to emphasise the probability of the story, and he does so to deny such claims. In his opinion, the creator wanted to create a fictional tale of a symbolic meaning (thus, the issue whether Rose's actions were possible is not important) (Thiele 2003: 173).

The German issue of the book published under a title *Rosa Weiss*, in its verbal layer differed from both English publications. The translation, or rather modification of the text, was entrusted to Abraham Teuter, who was also the publisher. Stan indicates that he changed names Rose Blanche to a first name and surname – Rosa Weiss – and states that it diminished the relation to the name of the organisation Weiße Rose. Then, Teuter used this surname also to name Rose's mother (the text includes a term 'Mrs Weiss'), and furthermore, added to the story the surname of the mayor (Schröder), thus eliminating a significant opposition between Rose and anonymous others. He resigned from introducing in the first part of the story the narration provided by Rose and from the beginning gave voice to a third person narrator. Moreover, he removed from the text references to Nazism and long winter. He extended the narration by including in the text descriptions of what we see in the pictures. Stan states that as a result of this measure, the mayor, who in Gallaz's text is mentioned only twice³ despite being shown in as many as six pictures, is mentioned as many as seven times and becomes one of the most important characters in the story. She also notices that the entire history of Germany entwined in the text begins and ends with underling the presence of a mayor. Indeed, in the first illustration we see him on a platform surrounded by army officers saying goodbye to leaving soldiers. At the end of the story, in a scene depicting residents running away from the town, Innocenti showed him getting in the car. The verbal comment says that he took the armband with the swastika off, which he had previously worn with pride (Stan 2004: 27).

In order to mitigate accusations against Teuter, it should be noticed that the mayor, who is not mentioned in Gallaz's text, remains an important character in the story, and Innocenti distinguishes him from among the others, since his red band and pink bow in Rose's hair introduce the only bright colours in pictures that are kept in monochromatic browns. Furthermore, it should be noted that McEwan already increased the frequency of mentioning the mayor in the verbal layer of the story and it was him, who was the first to resign from giving voice to Rose and started describing what can be seen in the pictures and adding various information. As soon as on the first page we find out that the mayor gave a boring speech, then we are also informed about taking off the armband, wearing of which the mayor used to pride himself on. A comparison of American and English versions allows noticing that some changes, for the introduction of which Stan blames Teuter, appear in McEwan's version.

Roberto Innocenti is a self-taught artist. Before he started illustrating books, he used to take on various jobs. Publications with his works started appearing already in the first half of the seventies. However, it is *Cinderella* (1983; Polish issue: 2015) on the basis of a fairy tale by Charles Perrault, which is considered the first significant work in his output. The artist transferred the action of the story to England in

³ In reality, the mayor is listed three times in Gallaz's text.

the twenties of the 20th century, and carefully reproduced then architecture, outfits and vehicles in his illustrations. Two years later he published *Rose Blanche*, to which some critics reacted very harshly. Michael Rosen, for instance, called it 'a complete mistake' (Stan 2004: 21). Despite those voices, the book received many awards, including a prize in Bologna. For illustrations to *Pinocchio* (1988, Polish issue: 2012) and *A Christmas Carol* (1990) he was nominated to the Kate Greenaway Medal. In 2003 he was awarded in Bologna again for *The Last Resort* (2002) written by J. Patrick Lewis, with whom he also co-created, well-known in Poland, *The House* (2009; Polish issue: 2012). In 2003 he published another picturebook in which he discussed the Holocaust – written by Ruth Vander Zee, fact-based *Erica's Story*. It is a story of a survivor girl presented in first person narration, which operates with very hushed, and thus extremely suggestive, images. In 2012 also the aforementioned *The Girl in Red* was published (Polish issue: 2014).

In 2008 Innocenti received the Hans Christian Andersen Award. On the occasion of handing it over, the President of the Jury, Zohareh Ghaeni said in the laudation that he encourages children to discover a new perspective in the visual world of stories. Thus, readers of his story can feel a sensual impression in each scene; can touch the material which characters' clothes are made of, the trunk, branches and leaves of trees as well as bird's feathers. In each scene they can hear the multitude of voices: barking dogs, whistling wind and silence that is present on a snowy day in the countryside. In his stories, the artist shares with children all human feelings. He also encourages readers to discover how far they can go and to give meaning to this journey. In books *Rose Blanche* and *Erica's Story* he is talking about the Second World War, in which millions of innocent people lost their lives. With only a few illustrations in *Erica's Story*, Innocenti forces the reader to become a witness to the historical tragedy. He shows a train full of women, men and children transported to concentration camps. He does not try to prolong the story, he does not go into details. He draws an empty pram left on the station, a bundle with a child thrown away from the railway car's window and a little girl standing in a garden full of colours and watching the passing train. The contrast between the black and white of earlier illustrations and the colour of the last one indicates the significance of maintaining peace as the biggest treasure in human life (Ghaeni 2008).

If we take a look at the book *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks* again, we can be surprised to notice that for authors of texts collected therein the topic of war is clearly not controversial – no one discusses it. It is even weirder, since at the very beginning of the volume one can find an article by Janet Evans reporting results of her own research conducted among children. When asked what books they consider especially challenging, young respondents listed six titles of which two were devoted to war: *The Enemy* by Davide Cali and Serge Bloch and *Smoke* by Fortes and Concejo. Their statements quoted in the article imply that the topic of the Holocaust is difficult for them, and the manner of presenting a story used in *Smoke* is not always unambiguously understandable.

Rose Blanche is simpler than the story by Fortes and Concejo. Concentration camps are discussed in a more unambiguous manner and less frequently. Innocenti only shows us hungry children behind a wire. At the end of the story both the children and Rose disappear and we can only guess what has happened to them. At the end of the *Smoke* the hero goes home with a chimney from which 'children go straight to heaven' – he enters a gas chamber. He is convinced that he goes to a shower, therefore, the information about a gas chamber is not expressed directly, but the fact that the story ends in this moment rather narrows the possibilities of interpreting the book otherwise (children whom Evans talked to understand that the hero dies in the end). Earlier, in the book by Fortes and Concejo, other drastic issues related to the functioning of a concentration camp are discussed, the majority of them are, however, mentioned in a way that is understood only by a person with knowledge about what happened there. For instance, a truck is mentioned onto which soldiers were trying to put Vadia (main character's friend) – and inside, victims were poisoned with fumes; a recollection that mother always gets back tired when she is carrying suitcases, but then she brings good stuff. Suitcases, as one can easily guess, are remains of those who were directed to gas chambers immediately upon arrival at the camp. Nevertheless, the child-hero does not know that, a child-reader will also not guess it, unless they have knowledge from other sources. However, *Smoke* also includes direct references of beating with rifles' butts, of hanging people, of standing in the cold and snow for many hours.

Not only does *Smoke* to a significantly larger extent than *Rose Blanche* reveal to the reader details of life in a concentration camp, but is also a work, in which the first person narration of a child-hero is consistent from the beginning to the end. At the end of the story he talks to us from inside of the gas chamber, which I – an adult – consider a shocking and drastic fictional solution. The hero of the *Smoke* is, however, a war victim – a boy, towards whom it is easy to feel compassion and who should be (because you are supposed to) pitied. The book by Innocenti and Gallaz is bolder in this regard, since its hero is German and she behaves against orders and bans of adults. Such a creation of the heroine and leading the plot in this manner make *Rose Blanche* a good starting point for a conversation not only about the horrors of a war, but also human attitudes, about obedience (not only civil) and a lack thereof, about following own moral rules and the price that one may have to pay for it. Primarily, however, one can discuss whether you have to always be obedient to the binding law and such authorities as political leaders or your own mother. It would be truism to write that a conversation is indispensable, since it is a necessary element of each reading with children. However, in this case an adult should be well-prepared for the discussion that Innocenti's work can lead to.

Stories and images which we come across in *Rose Blanche*, *Erica's Story* or *Smoke*, are undoubtedly moving and distressing. They are also controversial. It is worth, however, remembering what Serge Tisseron mentioned that children react to images differently than adults: images that are shocking for us may not impress them, and they may feel anxious while looking at images in which we do not see anything

distressing. This author also claimed that 'Media pay, in fact, a rather positive role by sometimes showing children horrors, which they do not experience in reality, but which they should be aware of.' (Tisseron 2006: 52). Further, however, the same author says that between a child and a drastic image there should always be an adult that will help placing this image in a proper cognitive and emotional perspective. 'And since only the child's loved ones can perform this task, we should start with sensitising parents.' (*Ibidem*).

Production of three versions of *Rose Blanche* – American, English and German – proves that already the publishers and co-authors of Innocenti's work had a problem with placing this book in a proper cognitive and emotional perspective. The referred voices of critics show that their efforts have not always been considered successful and assessed positively. Contradictory opinions regarding *Rose Blanche* are a signal that this book can be interpreted and evaluated differently. Tisseron is right when he indicates parents as the only ones who know the child well enough to help them understand difficult and terrifying matters. But what should parents do when faced with the necessity to explain what cannot be justified and rationalised, and remains inexplicable even for them?

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Summary

About 'Rose Blanche' and the story of the Holocaust

Rose Blanche is considered to be the first picture book for children, treating about the Holocaust. There were two English versions of this book edited in the 1980s. Compared to the original issue, different contents appeared in its German translation. The discussion around this book allows noticing difficulties with telling about the Holocaust, be it in this or in the other books created later in time.

Keywords

picturebook, the Holocaust, child protagonist, child lecturer, controversies

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